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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000895

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/INS AND DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/14/2015

TAGS: PHUM KIRF PGOV CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM REPORTS NO EVIDENCE OF FORCED CONVERSIONS; GSL
RESOLVE IN ADDRESSING ISSUE

REF: A. COLOMBO 818

1B. COLOMBO 890

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) In a May 11 briefing to the diplomatic community, UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Freedom Asma Jahangir said she had seen no evidence of forced conversions during her May 2-12 visit to Sri Lanka. While she heard credible reports of some instances of "inappropriate" conversion, she indicated that the issue had not reached the dire proportions depicted by the Buddhist religious right and declared that proposed anti-conversion legislation, which she stressed could have a negative effect on human rights in the country, is not an effective way of dealing with the matter. At the same time, while she could confirm that some attacks on Christian churches and harassment of Christians have occurred, she said she found no evidence that the phenomena are widespread. She believes that the Government of Sri Lanka is committed to dealing firmly with the issue, and is determined not to let religious tensions "fester." End summary.

SOME "INAPPROPRIATE" BUT NO FORCED CONVERSIONS

¶12. (C) In a May 11 briefing to members of the diplomatic community, UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Freedom Asma Jahangir told participants that she had seen no evidence of forced conversion during her ten-day visit to Sri Lanka. (Note: Jahangir was in Sri Lanka at the invitation of the government from May 2-12. In addition to Colombo, she visited Homogama, the site of attacks on an evangelical prayer center; Kandy; Batticaloa; Ampara; Jaffna and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam headquarters in Kilinochchi. End note.) Although conversations with right-wing Buddhists like the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) produced allegations of "unethical" or forced conversions on an epidemic scale, Jahangir said her interlocutors were able to cite only four or five actual cases of conversion--and no documentation that such conversions were "forced" or any direct testimony from the converts themselves. That said, she noted that there was credible evidence to suggest that some people or organizations involved in tsunami relief work may be using "inappropriate" methods of conversion but "nothing worth a whole country fighting over" and nothing that legislation could appropriately address.

¶13. (C) Jahangir reported meeting with representatives of all four major religions, as well as government officials and members of civil society. The only person she wanted to meet who remained unavailable throughout her visit was Minister of Buddhist Affairs Ratnasiri Wicremesekera, she said. Acknowledging that it was difficult for her to assess the level of popular resentment at reported conversions, she speculated that the impetus for anti-conversion legislation came from religious and political elites in Colombo. She sensed an "alarmist tendency" and a high level of "insecurity" among the Buddhist leadership. Such insecurity was easy to understand, she said, if the Buddhist clergy feels they must compete with religions that have institutional "parents" overseas, like Christianity and Islam. Even though right-wing Buddhists had rejected a proposal by Christian bishops to establish an inter-religious council to address conversion and other contentious issues, she said she believed that mainstream Buddhists would support it.

"ALARMISTS" ON BOTH SIDES

¶14. (C) Jahangir confirmed finding evidence that some attacks on Christian churches and harassment/intimidation of Christians had occurred, but commented that neither phenomenon appeared widespread. (Note: POL FSN is currently in Galle District to follow up reports of an attack on a Christian pastor's wife earlier in the month. End note.)

She indicated that just as there were "alarmists" on one side claiming an epidemic of forced conversions so, too, were claims of an epidemic of church attacks and anti-Christian activity also likely overstated. She noted in several instances there appeared to be some reluctance among local authorities to prosecute perpetrators of church attacks or other religious violence.

GSL MUST ADDRESS ISSUE HEAD ON

15. (C) Even if anti-conversion sentiment is not widespread, the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) must deal with the issue, especially legislative proposals to criminalize conversion, with "firmness," Jahangir said. Her review of both draft anti-conversion bills led her to conclude that the passage of either could have serious negative implications for human rights. (She added that the GSL bill appears even more prohibitive than the JHU's.) Nonetheless, she said she believes in general that the GSL is determined not to let the issue "fester," although she added that the GSL's current priority appears to be the peace process. The GSL's commitment to maintain religious freedom, along with Sri Lanka's strong tradition of tolerance and the presence of an active, volatile civil society, makes her hopeful, she indicated.

VIOLATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
IN LTTE-CONTROLLED AREAS

16. (C) In general, she said, the level of religious freedom in Sri Lanka compares favorably to other countries in the region, and she said she was "very impressed" with the candor and independent views expressed by government officials. On the other hand, her visit to LTTE-controlled territory--where she managed to meet with the single Buddhist monk remaining in the area--revealed evidence of severe repression regarding the practice of Buddhism. She described language used by the LTTE Human Rights Secretariat to depict Buddhism as "hateful."

COMMENT

17. (C) Jahangir's assessment that the GSL has no interest in promoting religious strife tracks with our own. (Ref B reports President Kumaratunga's most recent assurance--in a May 13 conversation with the Ambassador--that she will block any attempts to pass anti-conversion legislation.) Her statement that passage of anti-conversion legislation could jeopardize human rights, which she repeated in a May 12 press conference before her departure, should help bolster the GSL's resolve. In addition, however, we would like to see greater evidence of GSL resolve in prosecuting perpetrators of religious violence. That Ratnasiri Wickremayake, the hard-line Minister of Buddhist Affairs, is also the Minister of Public Security (with responsibility for police functions) suggests a potential conflict of interest. We will continue to press the GSL to safeguard the rights of all religions.

LUNSTEAD